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ORATION

DELIVERED ON THE

THIRD ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

South Carolina Historical Society,

AT

HIBERNIAN HALL, IN CHARLESTON,

ON

THURSDAY EVENING, MAY 27, 1858,

BY

JAMES LOUIS PETTGRU.

PRESIDENT OF THE SO. CA. HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE SOCIETY.

CHARLESTON S. C.

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ADDRESS.

It is the province of Reason to distinguish between right and wrong, and to deduce from that distinction rules for the conduct of life.

But Reason itself is not exempt from error. Theory and speculation often fail in doctrine as well as in practice, and there are no errors so dangerous as the mistakes of men in whom the faculty of reason is predominant, because they have the power, by persuasion and argument, of making those mistakes the source of pernicious opinions. Not to mention the disturbing influence of interest and passion, the seeds of error are so thickly sown, that Reason itself must lean on the authority of Experience.

Many trains of thought, like streams that have no outlet, terminate in uncertainty: and there are problems in moral philosophy on which reason disputes in vain.

Not individuals merely, but whole communities, are divided by opinions in which both parties are equally clear. There is many a debate, where there is no decision; and the judgment of one age is often reversed by the next. Thus the adherents of antiquity, under the name of Conservatives, and the partisans of progress, under the banner of Reform, wage an endless war. While by one party the clouds that obscure the sky are hailed with gladness, as harbingers of refreshing rain; to other minds the troubled atmosphere is filled with direful portents of the coming storm. On the one side, whatever is new is welcome; while with others, truth itself would be rejected, if it have not the stamp of antiquity.

Though opinion assumes such various shapes, and whole armies are recruited for the defence of every sort of doctrine, they all equally appeal to the authority of Reason; nor does Reason spurn the appeal—for they all draw their weapons from her armory; and neither intellect nor acuteness in debate, can be denied even to the most dangerous fanatics, or the wildest enthusiasts.

It is History that comes to the relief of conscience when perplexed by the conflict of opinion; and furnishes a guide for conduct and judgment, when reason is at fault. It is to the human family what experience is to the individual. Precedent and example furnish a clue for arriving at a decision, when the mind is bewildered by doubt. They show the difference between the line to be pursued, and that to be avoided; between the way that leads to ruin, and that which conducts to safety; and questions which Reason could not solve, are silently settled by Time.

Time, which is the destroyer of the works of men, gives them History in return for what it takes away. The legacy is of inestimable value, but it has not always been transmitted through faithful hands. The truth which it is the duty of history to reveal, is often clouded with fable. Yet it is to the study of history chiefly that we are indebted for the skill that is necessary to separate the ore from the dross; to discriminate between the true and the false; between the tales of fiction and the phenomena of real life. In early times this operation was but very imperfectly understood; and in the narratives that have come down from a remote antiquity, truth and fiction are so intimately blended as to defy separation. The credulity with which things contrary to nature and experience are received, even by able and observing men, becomes a marvel and problem for succeeding ages; that cherish, perhaps, on other subjects, opinions equally at variance with truth; destined in their turn, to be rejected with amazement as the exploded fallacies of an unquestioning period. As in the external world the senses are often unconscious of surrounding objects; so in the interior life of man, the mind may, for want of attention, be insensible to ideas that would other-

wise be obvious. The jurists say, with justice, that nothing is certain which has not been questioned—for till the question is made, there is no comparison, and of course no judgment; so that, without an actual examination, it is impossible to tell whether anything received for true will stand the test of investigation; for it may have been admitted at first by indolence or inattention, become fixed by habit, and gradually acquired the character of public opinion.

Although the difference between truth and falsehood is a distinction perceptible to the understanding of all rational beings; yet to discriminate between them in a complex proposition, where there is a necessity for comparison and reflection, requires the use of rules that are the later productions of a cultivated Reason. As long as History depended on tradition, and no cotemporary memorials preserved its integrity against the defects of memory, or the interpolations of partiality or hatred, the line between fable and veracious narrative was scarcely perceptible.

The account of what happened in former times, was not only imperfect for the want of accurate information, but the narrative was varied by prejudice or vanity; by the desire of inculcating the opinions, or gratifying the ambition of the writer. But when public registers of some sort began to be kept, cotemporary evidence checked the license of the imagination, and history assumed more and more the gravity of a moral teacher. The critical judgment of Polybius, for instance, is in strong contrast with the credulous avidity of Herodotus. For though the Father of History, as he is called, is a lover of truth, and deserving of confidence when he speaks from his own knowledge; so that succeeding investigations have tended more and more to raise his character for fidelity; it must be acknowledged that he seems to have been sadly deficient in weighing the credibility of evidence.

But there has ever been a wide difference between the traditionary and the critical school in the appreciation of history. The prevailing style has varied with the state of public opinion. Till the revival of letters, the traditionary school had clearly the advantage in popularity, and it is not without

wonder that we see that even the daring genius of Milton was so far subdued by the spirit of his age as to lend a sort of credence to the legend of King Brute and his Trojan Colony.

With the revival of letters, as a more liberal way of thinking prevailed, a more strict adherence to truth was exacted in every branch of knowledge. But it is mainly owing to the study of history, and the light which has been thrown on the records of the past; that the critical judgment, for which modern times are distinguished, has been refined and improved.

Recovering as it were from the sleep of ages, the human mind rejects the dreams that have been imposed on the world for history; and renders to truth the homage of an exclusive worship. That which is asserted without proof is deemed unworthy of credence or even of refutation. Assertion is not enough without evidence, nor a witness without some voucher for his competency as well as his integrity.

Authentic history may be said to commence with the times when historians began to avail themselves of cotemporary memorials of the events which they undertook to describe. Our pride may be humbled by the reflection that after all we know so little of the past; that even the dim light of tradition throws no ray upon the beginning of the present order of things. Moses alone takes up his theme with the morning of creation; but his mission is not that of satisfying profane curiosity; nor is the sacred narrative a fit subject for the critical tribunal. But it may not be improper to remark of the two main features of that narrative, that his chronology, which assigns a comparatively recent date to the first appearance of man on this globe, is corroborated by the investigations of science; and that the unity of the human race, a dogma consecrated by his authority, and dear to the sentiments of humanity, cannot be disproved by reason.

But the origin of nationalities, and the names of the great benefactors of mankind, who colonized the fairest parts of the earth, and made the greatest inventions, are buried in the darkness of oblivion. For great things were done before the

historic period began, and many great events, since that time, have been so transformed by fable, as to come down to us in the form of Apologue and Mythology.

But since men began to keep records and to raise intelligible monuments, new life is infused into the world by extending the pleasures of memory to the bounds of history; and elevating the enjoyments of hope to the height of an enduring fame. And whereas truth was once so mixed with error as to lie undistinguished in the mass of fable, she now shines with her own lustre; and though the path of life is beset with thorns, and the ascent is steep and laborious, the light of history irradiates the way: while the noble example of those who have gone before, encourages the generous souls who are willing to climb the hill; like the voice of companions calling from above to cheer and animate their efforts.

Well may Cicero, great master of wisdom as of eloquence, exclaim: History is the evidence of ages, the light of truth, the life of memory, and the school of life.

The South Carolina Historical Society aims at promoting historical studies, and preserving the materials of history that are derived from cotemporary witnesses.

The public mind, in our country, is far more occupied with the future than the past. It is a very general complaint that our people are careless of records. The materials of history are treated very much like the noble forest, not to be surpassed in beauty, with which Carolina was once covered. It is delivered, without mercy, to the havoc of the axe or the ravages of the devouring flame. The supply is supposed to be inexhaustible, and the process goes on till the recklessness of waste is checked by the alarm of approaching scarcity. We would interpose to protect the remnant of that noble forest which is threatened with extermination. We would be happy to lend our aid in preserving the memory of things remarkable or interesting, in our country, which are beginning to lose their hold on living memory. The labors, the trials, and dangers that have proved the endurance, or exercised the virtue of our countrymen, are in our eyes of sufficient interest to be preserved from neglect. We would inscribe with a name the

battle fields of Indian and British hostility; and would fain prevent the soil that has been watered with blood poured out in behalf of the Commonwealth, from being confounded with common earth. Our labors, though unpretending, are accompanied by good intentions; and I am happy to say, encouraged by a benefaction from the State equal to our moderate desires.

But the annals of our State have not been entirely neglected. The Colonial History has been written by Hewett—a writer rather pleasing by his style than instructive by the depth or extent of his information. The subject has been treated by Ramsay and Simms in narratives extending to our times. Ramsay's History is the work of a man of liberal mind, engaged in professional cares, and pursuing literature as a secondary object. But he had been an actor in many of the later scenes which he describes, and abounds in information, the result rather of his own observation and intercourse with life, than of a careful examination of books. Of the period antecedent to the Revolution, a critical examination was not in his power, for the records were beyond his reach. They lie disregarded in the State paper office in London, and it is a favorite object of this Society to make their contents known by copies obtained from official sources.

The History of Simms is a work of which parental affection may be proud, having been composed under its dictates, as we are informed by the Preface; to provide for a want that was felt in the education of the author's daughter. He deserves great praise for his attempt to reform the vulgar nomenclature of many places and natural features of the State, which are disgraced by obscure or trivial names; and to restore the historical and oftentimes euphonious designations by which they were characterized in the Indian tongue.

Valuable documentary materials belonging to the Revolutionary period have been supplied by Drayton in his History, and Johnson in his Life of Greene, to which the volumes published by Gibbes form a valuable addition; and the story of the war in Carolina may be read with pleasure in the soldiery narrative of Lee, and the lively pages of Weems, the biographer of Marion. Without dwelling on the laudable

munificence of Mr. Weston, who has invested some rare old memoirs of the colonial times with all the splendors of Typography, we must not omit to notice the Historical Collections of Carroll, and the work of Rivers, on the Proprietary period; which is a foretaste of the pleasure and instruction which we may hope to derive from the progress of his labors in the same field.

Perhaps the opinion is tinged with the partiality of a native, yet after making all allowance for the bias of patriotism, it may be said, I think, with justice, that the annals of South Carolina offer to the eye of the historian a field worthy of more than common attention.

The first scene partakes of all the interest of romance. The voyages of Ribault and Laudoniere carry the reader back to the period of the civil wars of France; and are connected with the great name of Coligny.

France, by means of these voyages, impressed the country with a name, but nothing more. It was intended as an asylum for French Dissent; and so, in fact, it became, but not under French domination. The sad fate of the Protestant exiles—the extinction of the hopes that had animated the great soul of Coligny, and led his adventurous countrymen to encounter so many sacrifices, is a gloomy picture; unredeemed by a single incident of a more genial nature, unless it be admiration of the noble DesGourges; who assumed the public cause when neglected by the State; and with a private hand avenged the insulted honor of his country.

To the same shores, dark with the shade of the primeval forest, after long years of undisturbed seclusion, came the English Colony, under better auspices. It was an eventful period, between the Great Rebellion and the Revolution. Society had been profoundly agitated, and the heaving billows bore witness of the recent storm. It was a singular colony of men who had fought in civil war on opposite sides, and were ready to do so again. It was equally an asylum for the oppressor and the oppressed. There royalist and republican, churchman and dissenter, found alike a refuge from the storms of life. Nor was it merely from the discordant elements of England or the

British Isles that the strange medley was gathered. The rivalry of England and France, which has disturbed the peace of the world for centuries, was then at its height. They regarded each other as natural enemies, and on the continent of America their meeting was the signal of hostilities. But as every variety of living thing found refuge in Noah's ark, so in Carolina there was a strange meeting of the human race.

The Protestants of France, that had waged many a hard fought battle, and seen the downfall of hopes to which humanity might cling as to a promise of blessing; now turned their eyes again to the shores which, in the preceding century, had attracted the attention of Coligny. To Carolina they came; but no longer French—not as masters, but as suppliants for the rights of hospitality. Bitter must have been the struggle with which they had overcome the natural pride of the human heart, when they sunk the proud name of Frenchman in that of Protestant; and taught their children to speak an alien tongue. They came with small assurance of welcome to join a discordant throng. Though the Huguenots have been scattered far and wide, and given proof in every clime of the power that abides with sincere religious faith; nowhere, is it believed, have they been more conspicuous—and nowhere has the sentiment of honor, so characteristic of their race, been cherished with more devotion—than in South Carolina.

The heterogeneous colony received accessions from every side. The Germans added no small share to the increasing stock. The European exile and the African slave mixed in the throng, and every shade of color and opinion had its representative in the mass. Then there was, in the process of time, a contrast no less striking between the Upper and Low country. The Upper country was not peopled from the older part of the colony, but by a different race; and its inhabitants maintained few relations with the people of the Low country, from whom they differed in manners as much as in origin; and with whom their sympathy was as limited as their intercourse. So great was the difference, that sixty years ago it was noticed in books

of geography that these parts of the State differed among themselves more than the other States differed from one another.

“If any city ever was in a state of inflammation, Rome at first was, being composed of the most hardy and resolute men, whom boldness and despair had driven thither from all quarters; nourished and matured to power by a series of wars, and strengthened even by blows and conflicts, as piles fixed in the ground become firmer under concussion.”*

Though the fame of Rome throws that of all other cities into the shade, and exposes even the mention of a casual resemblance to the suspicion of presumption; yet in one particular, we may, without exaggeration, challenge comparison. For though the name of Numa, the Roman lawgiver, is renowned in history, it is too much mixed with imposture to be the theme of genuine admiration; but we had a lawgiver whose fame places him in the front rank of real living men. The men of wit and fashion in the court of Charles II. who asked and obtained the gift of Carolina, selected a philosopher for the lawgiver of the nascent colony. And such a philosopher!

Locke was the friend of Shaftsbury, and he who shook the world by his Ideas—who sounded the depths of the Human Understanding, and walked undismayed to the brink of that abyss where lie the absolute, the incomprehensible, the unknown—he at the request of friendship compiled the first constitution for Carolina.

No existing constitution can boast such an illustrious ancestry. In reference to the mind from which it emanated, it is indeed an interesting document. It possesses interest also as a sort of sea-mark by which it may be seen how high the tide, that has since swept away so many institutions, had risen in 1672.

On examination, it will be seen that on the subject of religious liberty, the philosopher, though liberal, has many reservations; and in matters of State, his ideas conform to the pattern of the British Constitution rather than to any Utopian

*Plut. in vit. Numa.

standard. But some of his notions might well excite a smile, and others might give countenance to the common opinion, that great men are unfit for public affairs.

Shaftsbury, one of the Proprietors of Carolina, who with all his faults enjoys the undying fame of being the author of the Habeas Corpus Act, is the only person in modern history, neither priest nor lawyer, who was clothed with the highest judicial office; and took upon himself to be a Judge in the last resort, without serving an apprenticeship to the Law. And though the experiment was never repeated, the praise of a bitter enemy forbids us to regard it as a total failure. Perhaps the author of the Habeas Corpus Act will be more indebted for his fame to these lines, than to all that has been written in his behalf:

“Yet fame deserved no enemy can grudge
The Statesman we abhor, but praise the Judge,
In Israel's courts ne'er sat an Abethdin
With more discerning eyes, or hands more clean;
Unbribed, unsought, the wretched to redress,
Swift of dispatch and easy of access.”

It was perhaps, in deference to the example of his great friend and patron, that the Philosopher admitted into his constitution this article on the value of professional learning:

“It shall be a base and vile thing to plead for money; nor shall any one, except a near kinsman, not further than cousin-germain, be permitted to plead another man's case, until he has taken an oath that he does not plead for money.”

Another article will be read with surprise by some in the present day, and deserves notice for its historical value:

“Every free man shall have absolute power over his negro slaves.”

Though we are justly proud of Locke as our first lawgiver, it must be owned, to the disparagement of philosophy, that his constitution had a very brief and limited sway. But this only adds one instance more to the lesson of history, that a constitution cannot be manufactured. It must be so far a spontaneous production, as to proceed from and truly reflect the condition of things for which it is intended. The institution of a provincial noblesse, of seigniories, baronies and ma-

nors, new courts, and new notions of administering justice, were inconsistent with the real wants of the country, and hostile to the natural development of its resources. The constitution was quietly set aside, without having given rise to revolutionary measures. But all attempts to govern by a form of State which is not in keeping with the condition of the various interests which go to form a commonwealth, is a dangerous trial. The experiment was innocuous here, because the fulminating material was so minute in quantity. The government was unarmed, and the people were at ease. The same experiment on a great scale has shook the world with its explosions.

In a society constituted like Carolina, much harmony could not be expected, nor is the judgment deceived by the event. Fierce party contests prevailed from the beginning, but there was no anarchy. The colony was preserved from that by the ascendancy of party.

It is rather a discouraging fact for those who look forward to the indefinite progress of society, that the solidarity which should complete the edifice—which is the perfection of the principle of association—the harmony which secures the individual and the mass—is realized in the union of party, rather than in the union of all. But party is held together by a combination of those who have more than an equal share of power.

The history of Carolina is no exception. The elective franchise was liberally diffused, but the Test and Corporation acts guarded with jealousy the steps of the Provincial Assembly, as they did those of the Imperial Parliament; and the avenues of office were closed to all but the dominant sect. This state of things existed till 1778; a legislative fact, strangely ignored in the voluminous collection of Cooper, under whose revision the Statute Law of Carolina attained, in 1834, the bulk of ten quarto volumes.

After fifty years of contention a revolution took place—the proprietary government was subverted, and the colony placed under the direct control of the crown. The spirit of liberty which all these circumstances combined to foster, made it

very natural for this colony to take fire at any encroachment on their rights as British subjects, or to borrow the expression of Drayton, one of the leaders of the revolution, "the imperial people." By such men the cause of independence was embraced with great ardor. But where there is freedom there will be many ways of thinking, and the question of independence was not one of those propositions about which doubt is inconsistent with integrity.

There was in South Carolina a numerous Population, bound to the Government of the mother country, not only by the general sentiment of loyalty, but by the ties of gratitude for distinguished favors. They had received at the hands of the crown valuable lands as a free donation, which, by their industry, had been converted into thriving farms.

The government was known to them only by its beneficence, and the very failings of the administration were calculated to prevent collision—to preserve the kindly relations that subsisted between the people and their rulers. It was the duty of the royal government to extend to all their subjects a regular administration of justice and a due provision for the instruction of the people. Both Church and State were justly chargeable with the neglect of this duty. But it is not improbable that the King was liked the better for not sending bishops and lawyers into those settlements, where people lived in a primitive simplicity. Some irregularities were the consequence of disturbances connected with the rise of a set of men called Regulators. But upon the whole, simplicity of faith suffered but little from the want of ecclesiastical establishments, and manners supplied the place of law. Upon an impartial retrospect, it is difficult to condemn such people for being contented with their lot. The evils which they suffered from the want of what might be called a vigorous administration, had some compensations. Perhaps they bore them patiently because they seemed to be the inevitable concomitants of freedom and a frontier life; an opinion that derives no little countenance from experience. For if like causes produce like effects, the want of justice that gave rise to the Regulators is still a desideratum attested by the prevalence of lynch law.

Whatever may be the cause, certain it is that the people of South Carolina, were on this, as they had been on many other occasions, greatly divided; and the war of independence in this State, was marked with all the bitterness of civil strife. It is for that very reason more interesting to the historian.

Zeal in behalf of our country and our country's friends is commendable, and patriotism deservedly ranks among the highest virtues. But even virtue may be pushed to excess, and the narrow patriotism that fosters an overweening vanity, and is blind to all merit except its own, stands in need of the correction of reason.

History is false to her trust when she betrays the cause of truth, even under the influence of patriotic impulses. It is not true that all the virtue of the country was in the Whig camp, or that the Tories were a horde of ruffians. They were conservatives, and their error was in carrying to excess the sentiment of loyalty, which is founded in virtue. Their constancy embittered the contest, but did not provoke it. Their cause deserved to fail; but their sufferings are entitled to respect. Prejudice has blackened their name, but history will speak of them as they were, with their failings and their virtues, as more tenacious than ambitious; rather weak than aspiring; and show towards them the indulgence due to the unfortunate. And let it be remembered for the benefit of those who are influenced by a name, and pin their faith upon party;—for the instruction of those writers who, like unskillful painters, daub their pictures with glaring colors; that it was after the epithet of Tory had become perfectly detestable that it was freely bestowed on the Federalists, their most redoubted enemies.

South Carolina has been taunted with the division of parties that marked the war of independence. It is the reproach of ignorance. The division is a proof of sincerity, of freedom, of manliness of character. It embittered the contest, it gave occasion for the commission of many crimes, but it was also the cause of opportunities for the display of the highest virtues. Rutledge will ever stand in the ranks of fame with the great men whose civil wisdom, courage, and fidelity were

equal to every emergency, and proof against every trial. Nor is it wonderful that the name of Marion is inscribed on counties, towns and villages far beyond the theatre of his actions. For his character combines the virtues that appeal irresistibly to the instincts of the human heart. His courage, gentleness, simplicity, and superiority to interest or revenge, mark him as a fitting character for the gallery of Plutarch; and such a portrait as that great Limner delighted to draw.

It is not our intention to enter into details, far less to attempt to do justice to all, or to even a part of the eminent men, to whom as citizens of this State, we are bound by the debt of gratitude. Let us leave to Bancroft, and the masters of the historic page, the ample roll of fame; and the honored task of inscribing a nation's gratitude on the tablets of memory. It is enough for us to have shown that our State has furnished some historical materials, and called attention to the objects of our Society.

And now after having observed at some length on the composite structure of society, and the strong tendency of the people to fall into parties, the unanimity which for years has marked the public counsels of the State deserves to be mentioned as the unexpected solution, or successful development of the long continued drama. From the most heterogeneous we have become the most united of all the political communities on this continent. May that union be consecrated to peace, and the future history of the State contain the record of its steady advance in all the arts of life, and all the virtues that dignify humanity.

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